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GOOD STORY

Virginia's Common Language Protocol

SUMMARY

The Commonwealth of Virginia has adopted a common language protocol to improve interoperability during multi-agency and multi-jurisdictional events. The Common Language Protocol enables public safety officers to use plain English for day-to-day radio communications and a limited number of statewide coded transmissions to ensure responder safety.

BACKGROUND

Public safety agencies across the nation use coded language in day-to-day operations to communicate information from shift changes to bomb threats. For example, law enforcement agencies use detailed coded language systems called "10-codes" for internal radio transmissions. However, 10-codes and other disciplines' coded language systems are not standardized across jurisdictional lines, so a code used in one county may have an entirely different meaning in another county. This can result in confusion when jurisdictions and disciplines attempt to communicate with one another during an emergency. To improve interoperability during multi-jurisdictional and multi-disciplinary events, the National Incident Management System (NIMS) directs that "codes should not be used for radio communication; a clear spoken message...reduces the chances for error."

The use of plain English communications is a controversial issue among public safety providers. Many fire departments and emergency medical services (EMS) providers already use plain English, while most police departments still use 10-codes. As a result, these disciplines often have different opinions on plain language communications. This lack of consensus was one of the main hurdles to the statewide adoption of plain English communications in Virginia.

In 2004, Virginia's State Interoperability Executive Committee (SIEC) recommended the establishment of a statewide common language protocol as a major initiative for the Commonwealth Interoperability Coordinator's Office (CICO). A common language protocol enables public safety agencies to use plain English and standardized coded language for internal radio communications, which improves interoperability and complies with the NIMS guidance. This goal statement reflected a broad consensus in the public safety community because the SIEC includes representatives from numerous respected public safety organizations. The

Commonwealth Interoperability Coordinator's Office (CICO)

Located in the Governor's Office of Commonwealth Preparedness, the CICO coordinates major interoperability activities throughout Virginia and facilitates discussion among federal, state, and local stakeholders.

State Interoperability Executive Committee (SIEC)

The SIEC serves as a steering group for the CICO. In this role, the SIEC helps identify and define interoperability initiatives for the CICO.

Virginia governor's November 2005 Executive Order for state and local agencies to adopt NIMS further advanced this initiative.

In October 2006, the CICO released the finalized Common Language Protocol as a best practice for statewide implementation. The NIMS Integration Center reviewed Virginia's Common Language Protocol and confirmed that, with the exception of the standardized coded language scenarios, it is "NIMS compliant for Intra-State operations in the Commonwealth of Virginia."

NIMS Integration Center Guidance on Plain English Communications

"It is required that plain English be used for multi-agency, multi-jurisdiction and multi-discipline events...While the NIMS Integration Center doesn't require plain English for internal operations, we strongly encourage it."

See: [NIMS Alert: More About 10-Codes and Plain English](#) and [NIMS Alert: NIMS and Use of Plain Language](#)

GOALS

The Common Language Protocol facilitates the use of standardized language for internal radio communications, which enables public safety agencies to communicate more easily with other agencies and jurisdictions during major emergencies.

DESCRIPTION

The Commonwealth of Virginia has developed and adopted a common language protocol that enables public safety responders to use standardized language for day-to-day radio communications. The CICO worked closely with state and local stakeholders throughout the development process. The resulting Common Language Protocol improves interoperability during multi-disciplinary and multi-jurisdictional events while also addressing law enforcement agencies' concerns about responder safety. The Common Language Protocol has received support from Virginia's major public safety professional organizations and is being implemented across the commonwealth.

Developing the Common Language Protocol **Convening an Initiative Action Team**

The CICO and the SIEC established an Initiative Action Team (IAT) in fall 2005 to develop a common language protocol that reflects the needs and interests of all affected response disciplines. The SIEC's goal statement identified a clear mission and provided performance metrics that could be used to measure the completion of the initiative. The IAT used the goal statement to immediately set an agenda and to focus its discussions on the development of a final product.

The IAT included members from various public safety disciplines, levels of government, and regions. The CICO's desire to involve all stakeholders in the protocol's development had clear implications for the IAT's size. Namely, the IAT needed to be large enough to represent the diverse needs and concerns of the public safety community. At the same time, the IAT needed to be small enough for team members to conduct manageable and productive discussions. As a result, the IAT included representatives from the following organizations:

- Association of Public-Safety Communications Officers;
- Chesterfield County Sheriff's Department;
- City of Virginia Beach;
- CICO;
- Fairfax County Fire and Rescue;
- Henrico County Division of Police;

- Office of Commonwealth Preparedness;
- Powhatan County;
- Virginia Association of Chiefs of Police;
- Virginia Association of Governmental Emergency Medical Services Administrators;
- Virginia Department of Corrections;
- Virginia Department of Transportation;
- Virginia Department of Fire Programs;
- Virginia Department of Forestry;
- Virginia Fire Chiefs Association;
- Virginia State Firefighters Association; and
- Virginia State Police.

The IAT was co-led by a member of the Association of Public-Safety Communications Officers and a member of the Virginia Association of Chiefs of Police, who was also the chairman of the SIEC. These leaders kept the meetings balanced, ensured that everyone could contribute their opinions, and helped to build a consensus among the different groups. As a result, the members of the IAT viewed the development of the Common Language Protocol as an unbiased and multi-disciplinary process.

Conducting Surveys of the Public Safety Community

The IAT used two statewide questionnaires to collect input from the public safety community. The IAT sent the surveys to police chiefs, fire chiefs, sheriff's offices, EMS supervisors, 911 center supervisors, agencies participating in the Statewide Agencies Radio System (STARS), and university police departments. The first survey identified which organizations were using plain English and which were using 10-codes. The second survey solicited input on specific common language strategies, such as reprogramming computer assisted dispatch (CAD) systems. The IAT used these surveys to identify which implementation strategies could be reasonably applied on a statewide level.

Determining What Not to Include

The IAT decided that the Common Language Protocol must remain simple so that it could be implemented by all jurisdictions, regardless of their resources. As a result, Virginia's Common Language Protocol does not include guidance on a number of issues, including:

- **Professional language:** Some IAT members recommended the development of standardized phrases so that public safety officers would not use unprofessional language for radio communications. However, the IAT decided not to pursue this large endeavor and instead concluded that agencies could develop such language on an individual basis.
- **CAD systems:** Dispatchers usually enter 10-codes into CAD systems, so some IAT members recommended that CAD systems be reprogrammed to require abbreviated plain English entries instead. The IAT did not want to issue an unfunded mandate requiring such action because some jurisdictions would need to hire contractors to reprogram their CAD systems. Therefore, the IAT left the matter of CAD reprogramming to the discretion of individual jurisdictions.

Components of the Common Language Protocol

The IAT finalized its recommendations for the Common Language Protocol in August 2006. The Common Language Protocol encourages Virginia's state and local public safety agencies to adopt, practice, and use plain English for all day-to-day operations, with the exception of four scenarios that require coded language to protect the safety of responders. Public safety agencies are also encouraged to simplify verbal phrases and to use the International Phonetic Alphabet to further improve interoperability.

Day-to-Day Use

The Common Language Protocol directs public safety agencies to use plain English for all day-to-day operations. According to NIMS guidance, agencies are only required to use plain language during multi-agency or multi-jurisdictional events. However, responders tend to revert back to their training in stressful situations. If responders continued to use coded language for day-to-day operations, the IAT believed that they would likely use coded language during major emergencies as well. As a result, the IAT concluded “the implementation of common language will only be successful if it is trained, used, and practiced on a day-to-day basis.”

Statewide Adoption of the International Phonetic Alphabet

The Common Language Protocol directs all public safety agencies to use the International Phonetic Alphabet to communicate word spellings. Although many of Virginia’s responder agencies already use the International Phonetic Alphabet, a small number of law enforcement agencies use an entirely different phonetic alphabet. The statewide adoption of the International Phonetic Alphabet is intended to eliminate confusion during multi-jurisdictional and multi-agency events.

Exceptions for the Safety of Responders

Virginia’s Common Language Protocol contains four coded scenarios intended to protect the life and safety of emergency responders. The principal objection to the use of plain English was that it would reveal sensitive information to suspects in a responder’s immediate vicinity, which could endanger life or safety. The IAT decided to address these concerns by identifying four scenarios where standardized codes will be used. These codes are uniform across the Commonwealth of Virginia and will be used to communicate the following information:

- **Holding transmission of sensitive information:** This code is used when the caller is holding sensitive information relating to an individual or individuals that may be within earshot.
- **Responder taking subject into custody:** This code indicates that a responder intends to take a subject into custody and anticipates resistance. A dispatcher may also use this code to direct a responder to take a subject into custody and to expect resistance.
- **Responder needs backup or assistance:** This code indicates a situation that is unstable but poses no immediate life threat. In these scenarios, an overt request may unnecessarily escalate the situation.
- **Responder is in immediate danger:** This code indicates a situation where either a responder or a dispatcher has identified an immediate threat and must convey this information without alerting the subject.

Implementing the Common Language Protocol

The CICO and the SIEC released the Common Language Protocol in October 2006. The release of the protocol was aided by the support and endorsement of Virginia’s major public safety professional organizations, such as the Virginia State Police, which had participated throughout the development process. As a result, many state and local organizations have adopted and implemented the Common Language Protocol.

Presentation as a Best Practice

The CICO, the SIEC, and the IAT presented the Common Language Protocol as an optional best practice, so that localities would not view it as a top-down, mandatory template for NIMS implementation. NIMS had already given state and local agencies a mandate to

transition to plain English; the Common Language Protocol is a stakeholders-endorsed method to make the NIMS mandate operational. Although the protocol was presented as a non-mandatory practice, future state-based interoperability funding will be contingent upon endorsement of the protocol.

The Common Language Protocol was first publicly presented at the 2006 Virginia Interoperable Communications Conference, which was attended by a large number of public safety personnel. The presentation included a lengthy question-and-answer session so conference attendees could receive clarification on issues that concerned them.

The CICO also developed several documents to communicate information on the Common Language Protocol to state and local public safety agencies. For example, the CICO produced a one-page document that briefly outlined the protocol's components and endorsements. The CICO wrote case studies that captured the successes and challenges of individual departments and agencies that had implemented the Common Language Protocol. These case studies were developed as guidance for organizations and other jurisdictions that have not yet transitioned to plain English.

Online Resources

The common language one-pager and the case studies are available on the CICO's [Web site](#).

Endorsements

The CICO and the SIEC contacted Virginia's principal public safety professional associations to obtain endorsements for the Common Language Protocol. The first organizations to endorse the Common Language Protocol were:

- Virginia Association of Chiefs of Police;
- Virginia Association of Public-Safety Communications Officials;
- Virginia Fire Chiefs Association;
- Virginia Sheriff's Association;
- Virginia Port Authority; and
- Virginia State Police.

These endorsements helped the Common Language Protocol gain acceptance within the disciplines represented by those associations.

Implementation by Virginia State Police

The Virginia State Police transitioned to the Common Language Protocol in October 2006. Since the Common Language Protocol was kept simple, many implementation decisions were left to the discretion of individual departments and agencies. As a result, the Virginia State Police made three significant additions to the general statewide guidance:

- **CAD system reprogramming:** The Virginia State Police reprogrammed its CAD system to change the 10-code call types to abbreviations derived from plain English. The CAD system will continue to accept 10-code call types for 6 months after the reprogramming to allow dispatchers to gradually adjust to the change. However,

CAD Reprogramming: Identifying Unintended Consequences

The Virginia State Police learned that changing the original call types required action in two other areas:

- **Other Organizations Using CAD Information:** The Virginia State Police had to inform the Virginia Department of Transportation and naval intelligence personnel of their CAD reprogramming, since those agencies also used CAD information.
- **Internal System Processes:** The Virginia State Police had to identify and modify all internal system processes that were triggered by the original 10-code call type entries.

the CAD system will now display information only in the new format, so dispatchers must learn the new abbreviations to read CAD outputs.

- **Inclusion of National Crime Information Center terrorist codes:** Virginia State Police dispatchers will continue to use the National Crime Information Center's terrorist codes when a suspect has been identified by the Terrorist Screening Center.
- **Professional language guidance:** The Virginia State Police has requested that all troopers, officers, and dispatchers communicate using the plain English definitions on the existing 10-code list in order to maintain brevity and professionalism on the radio.

REQUIREMENTS

Keys to Success

Stakeholder Approach

Virginia's Common Language Protocol was developed in close collaboration with the public safety stakeholders that would be affected by its implementation. Obtaining input from the critical stakeholders enabled the IAT to develop a common language protocol that addressed the needs of all affected public safety agencies. As a result of this process, the Common Language Protocol has obtained quick endorsement and is currently being implemented across the state.

Clear Goals

The early identification of a clear goal allowed the IAT to immediately set an agenda and to focus its discussions on the development of a defined end product.

Manageable Size of the IAT

The IAT's membership was large enough to represent the diverse concerns of the affected stakeholders and small enough for conversations to be manageable and productive.

Exceptions for Safety

The main objection law enforcement officers raised against using plain English was that it would affect safety. By identifying four scenarios where standardized coded language may be used, the Common Language Protocol vastly improves communications interoperability while simultaneously accommodating law enforcement agencies' concerns about safety.

Resources

No significant resources were required to develop and to implement the Common Language Protocol.

Training

Virginia's Common Language Protocol is simple enough that departments and agencies can train personnel on it internally. For example, the Virginia State Police included common language training in its biannual in-service training, which coincided with the protocol's release. The training lasted 1 hour for supervisors and ½ hour for dispatchers. Since the troopers had already completed their training, they were notified of the new procedures through a departmental bulletin.

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